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THE ETHICAL VALUE OF ORIENTAL RELIGIONS UNDER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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To estimate with any considerable degree of accuracy the moral value of the Oriental religions under the Roman Empire is a hard and perhaps an impossible task. The difficulties arise in part from the fact that these religions, like most others, did not aim primarily at developing what we understand by morality in the individual, but rather at establishing such relations with the gods as to give men security and prosperity here and hereafter; and in part the difficulties are due to the paucity of our data and our liability to error in the interpretation thereof. Yet a religion, like any other form of human expression, inevitably influences as well as reflects the conduct of the social group which cultivates it; that is to say, it cannot exist apart by itself. Therefore it is not an unprofitable thing to attempt to determine with such accuracy as may be attainable the relation to morality of the imported Oriental cults which were widely cultivated in the Occidental part of the Roman Empire between the first and the fourth centuries of our era. We confine our consideration to the Western half of the Empire, for there the evidence as to these exotic religions is most plentiful and it is possible to see them isolated, so to speak, from their native environment. It will be necessary, however, first to consider the moral and religious environment into which these cults entered.

The temper and the experiences of the Roman people down to the end of the third century B.C. tended on the

whole to develop self-control, fidelity to duty, a certain stern intolerance, and a strict discipline—virtues which we usually regard as distinctly Roman; virtues, moreover, which were never wholly lost even in the times of Rome's degeneracy. These virtues did not originate in the Roman religion, although that religion fostered certain characteristics, such as a regard for family obligations and a scrupulous care in the observance of duties toward the gods, on strict attention to which men believed the material safety and prosperity of the State depended. But beyond inculcating a sense of the obligation of social duty, of loyalty, and of reverence, Roman religion did not go; and it had no higher purpose than to secure the material prosperity of the family, the gens, and the State. The Greek religious ideas which were received into the commonwealth, even in their noblest form, did nothing more than lend a certain support to family and civic relations; and the influence of Greek mythology in general must have been bad. Whether believed or not, the tales of a god's amours could not but degrade, and the extreme was reached when such liaisons were chosen as subjects for dramatic representation, as in the *Amphitruo* of Plautus, or when a poet like Ovid could make Jupiter a model for human gallants in their vicious pursuits. Doubtless many a lover like Chaerea in Terence's *Eunuchus*, excused his wanton loves by appealing to the example of Supreme Jove. The period from the close of the Second Punic War (202 B.C.) to the end of the republic was a time of much demoralization and decay. The rapid increase of wealth and the growth of luxury, the acquisition of great numbers of slaves, the large freedom from external dangers, the loss of political vitality which made the State the prize for contending political bosses from the Gracchi to Octavian, above all, the rapid growth of a sceptical rationalism and the development of a selfish individualistic spirit, together with many other influences,

broke down the sense of social duty and of political obligation which had hitherto proved an effective and vital power in Roman life. The elder Cato was quite right in his belief that the Hellenism of his day was destroying the stern character of an earlier time. The new rationalistic spirit could not but despise the superstitions of the old Roman religion which still saw a fearful portent for the State in the birth of a two-headed calf, and it clearly recognized the fact that the beliefs of the fathers could not support the new ideas of morality and justice which were coming into existence. The Roman had a habit of judging institutions by their practical value to life; and measured by such pragmatic standards Roman religion could no longer claim the support of enlightened men. The educated might hold, with the famous Scaevola, that the traditional State religion was good for the mass of citizens; but on the whole the moral influence of that traditional religion was distinctly weak in the last hundred and fifty years of the republic; even the sacred rites of the family were neglected, and religious obligations had long been regarded as burdens which one would gladly avoid. The reforms of Augustus were unable to restore the influence which religion had once exercised. The belief in collective responsibility, according to which the sin of an individual brought punishment on all members of the social group, had been abandoned in favor of individual responsibility; the individual was the one who must reap the reward of his good or evil deeds. To this idea of individual responsibility neither the native Roman nor the imported Greek ideas of religion gave much support. Philosophy had become the moral guide in life.

The practical Romans at every period left metaphysical speculation to the Greeks, and found their chief philosophical interest in ethics. This is one of the reasons why, out of all the forms of philosophy which

Greece passed on to the West, Stoicism with its emphasis on a stern self-control and independence made the strongest appeal to the citizens of Rome. The central theme of the philosophy of the Porch, as the Romans knew it, was the art of living in obedience to nature, free from all control or influence of external circumstances. Furthermore, Stoicism inculcated a sense of duty, of responsibility, and for all its individualistic tendencies taught the subjection of the individual to common laws—things which appealed to the native instincts of the Roman. Epicureanism also had many devotees, especially in the last century of the republic; under the Empire its tenets naturally favored a safe policy of quietism and accommodation. Its ethics, like those of Stoicism, fostered the social virtues, though possibly with less earnestness and far-reaching influence than the system of its rival. As for Stoicism, we must remember that in the hands of Panaetius this philosophy had lost many of those uncompromising and doctrinaire characteristics which earlier marked it, and that by appropriation and accommodation it had developed into a universal philosophy for all mankind. There can be no doubt that it both strengthened the moral fibre of men when the few supports which religion had once given were weakened, and that it actually elevated and ennobled the moral concepts of its followers. In the first century of the Empire, when politics no longer offered any large field for action, when the extremes of extravagant luxury and hopeless poverty alike depressed society, and terror of the imperial power weighed heavy on all prominent or ambitious citizens, men sought support and peace in the resistant elements of the various eclectic systems of the day, above all in those of Stoicism, which had become almost exclusively a moral philosophy. It was not now busy with speculation, but concerned itself almost wholly with the art of living—

an art which was not to be learned from books in the closet, but from preachers in the market-place, and which was to be developed by constant and severe practice. Abstention from all that lies outside the will's control, daily advance toward the ideal, contemplation and realization of the divine nature, the practice of a kindly altruism, the captaincy of one's own soul—these are the teachings which Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius repeat over and over again. Philosophy with them had acquired a strong religious trend.

Along with this shift in the spirit of philosophy had come a change in social ideals. The rude soldier Vespasian on the imperial throne set the example of a simpler and less extravagant scale of living in Rome, to which financial exhaustion and sated appetite were already turning the higher classes; and the common condition of all citizens as subjects of the imperial power tended to lessen social differences and to give a visible support to the Stoic doctrine of the equality of men. This with the sister doctrine of the natural rights of men led toward that humanitarianism which begins to be marked in the second century.

These tendencies were the natural manifestations of those great movements of thought which had been going on around the Mediterranean for fully three centuries. The mighty political and social changes produced by the conquests of Alexander, and later by the extension of the Romans' power and by the establishment of the Roman Empire, had turned the individual back on himself and had made him seek peace and freedom for his soul in escape from the external world by means of philosophy; but neither the Epicurean *ἀταραξία* nor the sterner Stoic *ἀπάθεια* could satisfy all, and men were gradually drawn into new religious movements. There was a sense of estrangement from God, a desire to secure satisfactory relations with the divine, which

had found its outlet through the Greek Mysteries and which was bringing about a revival of Platonism and of Pythagoreanism. At the very beginning of the Empire thoughtful men were oppressed by a sense of weariness produced by the civil wars and by the social disasters which came in their train—a weariness which is unmistakably expressed by Horace, Livy, and Virgil. This feeling, united with that persistent belief that ultimately all the physical, political, and moral well-being of the State depended on the fulfilment of duties toward the gods, made welcome to many the moral and religious revival which the Emperor Augustus had attempted to bring about. The fact that the Emperor's efforts had small success did not affect the sentiments of the people. Scepticism gradually gave way to faith, and license was opposed by a revived moral sense. The moral ideal was intimately connected with religion; and this connection finds clear expression in the writings of the later Stoics. Seneca would teach his young friend, the Epicurean Lucilius, that only goodness can propitiate the gods and that service of the gods consists in imitating their righteous character; that worship is the devotion of a pious and upright will. Epictetus shows that in the generation between Seneca and himself philosophy had come still closer to religion. Obedience to heaven's law, happy submission to the divine will, joyful praise of God, more than once form the subjects of his lessons. It is true that the God of Epictetus does not differ very much from the Nature and Providence of the earlier Stoics; but his emphasis on the concept of the divine all-ruling power as a personal being was destined to have significant results. There is also in his teaching a sense of man's dependence on God which is far removed from the self-sufficiency of the earlier Stoic doctrine; and there was developing a religious mysticism also which was to find free expression in the second century. Philosophy

urged its moral aim as insistently as ever, but it no longer regarded man's reason and will as sufficient for his needs; it taught that to fulfil his duty and secure his freedom man must depend on divine aid. Thus even among the Stoics we find something like a union of philosophy and religion accomplished.

Now it was into this world whose social, moral, and religious ideas we have been sketching that the Oriental religions entered. The earliest of these was that of the Great Mother of the Gods, to whom the state was turned in 205 B.C. by the disasters of the Second Punic War. Her worship was of a wild and orgiastic nature, wholly unlike anything which the Romans had seen before on Italian soil, and we can well believe that the citizens were greatly shocked and disgusted by the processions and rites of the emasculated Phrygian priests who under the republic were imported to carry on this Asiatic worship. No citizens were allowed to join the priesthood for over two centuries and there is abundant evidence that the Romans on the whole shrank from the cult which the guardians of the Sibylline books had imposed on their trusting ignorance. Yet the worship of the goddess gained ground, so that it was the most important of all foreign cults under the republic; in spite of the repugnance which the excesses of her priests undoubtedly excited, it is clear that the Great Mother was always regarded with reverence and trust. Under the Empire she acquired new popularity. In the reign of the Emperor Claudius, apparently, the goddess was especially favored; new festivals were added to her worship, which was celebrated with great pomp; and Roman citizens were no longer barred from the priesthood. The Emperor Caligula had favored Isis, whose worship had already existed for a century in spite of all opposition. Close contact with the East and Eastern immigration brought many other Oriental divinities to the West—Syrian Baalim

under various names, Atargatis, the goddess of Bambyce, known to the West as "The Syrian Goddess," and her male consort Adad, conceived as the "Divine Sun"; and before the end of the first century the Persian Sun-god Mithras came, who was destined in the second and third centuries to exert a greater influence than any other. There were many others whose names need not be repeated here. With regard to the most of these divinities our data are so scanty that we are obliged to content ourselves with conclusions drawn by analogy from the cults with which we are acquainted. We must therefore confine ourselves mostly to the religions of the Great Mother, Isis, and Mithras.

The popularity and the spread of these cults were not due in the first instance to any superior morality which they inculcated, but rather to the emotional satisfaction which they gave, and the assurance of salvation which was offered to the individual. We have seen that in the native Roman as well as in the composite Greco-Roman religions of the republic scanty means were offered by which the individual could draw near to God and through emotional experience gain assurance of present security or of a happy future life. But these were the very things which the Oriental religions, like the Greek Mysteries, did offer in various forms and ways. The demand for such assurances in Rome itself had been early shown by the popularity of the Bacchic Mysteries, which had acquired so deep a hold on the people of Italy that when the attention of the authorities was called to them in 186 B.C., the senate did not dare to attempt to repress them completely, but only checked and regulated the celebrations. The Oriental cults then owed their popularity first of all probably to the orgiastic and mystic elements in their ritual rather than to a recognition of any moral value which they might possess. Indeed the possibilities for evil in these cults were many. The noc-

turnal celebrations with their accompaniments readily lent themselves to immoralities, as historic instances show. Intense excitement leading at times to self-mutilation, the Oriental excess of emotion, the obscene elements in the myths of Attis and the Great Mother, of Isis and Osiris—none of these tended to elevate morality or to inspire a noble code of ethics. Unquestionably too the exotic orgiastic of these cults were employed by charlatans and impostors to secure their own base ends.

Yet no great religious conquest can be explained on emotional grounds alone, and undoubtedly the Oriental cults possessed elements which could furnish stronger moral stimulus and make greater moral demands than the traditional forms of religion in the western half of the Roman world. It is hardly necessary to point out that this is in no way disproved by the fact that the majority of the devotees of these gods down to the second century of our era belonged to the classes which were socially despised—foreigners, slaves, and freedmen—and that the apparent devotion of the demi-monde to Isis, for example, can no more be quoted against the character of the goddess's cult than can the devotion of the same class to the Virgin today. Yet it seems probable that until the empire these cults lagged behind the higher moral standards of the day, but that they eventually responded to the rising ethical demands so that by the second century of our era those elements within them which made for a higher morality had become effective. The coarser parts of the myths had long been allegorized and their symbolism was universally accepted; indeed even revolting tales were given an ethical significance by the subtle but not dishonest skill of the learned. The Emperor Julian wished to make the temples centres of religious instruction; and St. Augustine tells us how he had heard the ancient tales of mythology interpreted to the assembled peoples for their moral edification.

The germs of the moral development of these Oriental religions naturally lay in the nature of the religions themselves.

First, we must note the conception of the nature of God which now prevailed in the Oriental cults. Greek religious thought before the close of the fourth century B.C. had come to regard not only justice but goodness as essential attributes of divinity, although popular religion then, as always, lagged far behind the thought of the intellectual leaders. The philosophers of the Hellenistic and Roman periods—Stoics, later Platonists, and Eclectics—advanced to the idea of God as a divine providence, who at times was also conceived to be a personal divinity, filled with an infinite kindness toward men—one on whose grace humanity's life and happiness depend. The Eastern religions had come to conceive of their gods not only in this general fashion, but also regularly as gods who care for the individual.

In the eleventh book of his *Metamorphoses* Apuleius gives us valuable information on these points. To his hero Lucius the goddess Isis is the ever-present divine providence and source of salvation, the one who always saves and cares for mankind; like a mother she is patient with the immature prayers of her children, kind and pitiful toward men in their afflictions; in her good time she calls her chosen ones to the secrets of her service. Serapis likewise is represented by the rhetorician Aristides as everywhere and eternally present and active, at once kind and most fearful, but inclined to pity. The god's gracious pity toward men is indeed adduced as a reason why his devotees should exhibit the same character toward their fellows. Thus the religion of Serapis and Isis led toward that humanitarianism to which philosophy came by another road.

In the course of time even the Great Mother of the Gods ceased to be the wild Phrygian goddess, who con-

demned her scornful lover to his fate, and who found her joy in human blood. Long before the last century of her sway she had become the kindly mother of all Nature, while Attis became the Sun-god, the common symbol of all-embracing divinity. Inscriptions of the fourth century show that the Mother Goddess drew the devotion of the noblest and most intellectual pagans at Rome.

Furthermore, the Oriental gods claimed the whole of their devotee's life; they were not satisfied with occasional worship or with participation in other sacred rites. The concept of God as not only omnipresent and omniscient but also as ever caring for individuals—a belief to which the Stoic hardly attained—led to the ideal of the religious life as one constantly devoted to the contemplation of the divine. So Apuleius makes Lucius close his prayer of praise to Isis with the promise that he will always guard within his heart and there contemplate the sacred image of the goddess. As the characteristics of the goddess were now nobly conceived, such religious contemplation had its moral value.

Again, these religions laid stress on the necessity of removing moral pollution by penance and purificatory rites. Juvenal would regard Isis as a procuress, and he mocks at the women of his time who, naked and trembling, crawled on bleeding knees about the Campus Martius; but the very severity of the satirist's verses shows the influence of the goddess. Baneful as the Orientals undoubtedly sometimes were, the practices which call forth Juvenal's scorn were intended to purify the devotees of their sins and to restore them to divine favor. The doctrine of the dual nature of man, according to which the soul is noble and divine but the body base and evil—a doctrine introduced into Greek thought by the Orphics and adopted by Plato—had been reconciled with the Oriental ideas of opposing good and evil powers in the world. The Zoroastrian belief in the constant warfare

between good and evil, in the cosmic struggle for supremacy between the god of light, Ormazd, and Ahriman, the lord of darkness, was paralleled by the doctrine of the strife between Osiris and Typhon. Zoroastrianism had a strong moral motive from the first. When the practical synthesis of its ethical ideas with those of other religions was accomplished, and when religion adopted the Stoic view of man as a microcosm, these dualistic notions acquired a heightened ethical value.

Not only were penance and purification required of the devotee, but similar acts were necessary before one could be admitted to the company of consecrated worshippers. The would-be initiate into the mysteries of Isis had to refrain from animal food and wine for ten days and undergo purificatory baths and sprinklings before his initiation could begin. Similar requirements were made in other cults, the purpose of all being to cleanse the neophyte from sin and to prepare him for that union with the divinity which was to be granted him during initiation.

Yet neither such initial purification nor occasional penance was sufficient; for, as was said above, the Oriental gods required continual devotion on the part of their followers who wished to attain to full knowledge of the divine. Such knowledge, Plutarch points out, is the chief thing to be desired; but he adds that the goddess Isis grants this knowledge of the true doctrine only to those who, being initiate in her mysteries, continue in a life of sobriety, refraining from the pleasures of the senses and the passions, and who constantly perform in her temples the stern and rigorous service which she exacts. The devout Chaeronean dwells on the lesson that the purpose of these religious exercises is to secure that knowledge of the first and supreme being which the purified spirit alone can comprehend, and that only in constant association with divinity. Thus in the Oriental religions, as in

the prevailing philosophies under the Empire, advance toward perfection was made dependent on a life of religious exercise, and the ideal of purity included a certain asceticism.

Reference has already been made to the concept of the struggle between the good and evil powers in the cosmos. The conflict was emphasized more in Mithraism than in any contemporary religion. In it man's moral obligation was to range himself on the side of Ormazd against Ahriman that he might secure his own salvation as well as contribute to the general victory of the good. Although we lack satisfactory data, we may reasonably believe that the Mithraist was taught to imitate Mithras, not only as the companion, helper, and ally of the faithful, but also as the god of truth, justice, and purity. The devout believed that Mithras promised his followers victory over their human enemies and over their unseen foes, the powers of evil which constantly threaten human safety. The religion of Mithras was essentially a religion of soldiers. One of the grades of initiation was named "the soldier," and in fact devotion to the god was conceived as a military service; the neophyte, like the new recruit to the army, took an oath. The Isiac devotee was likewise enlisted in the goddess's sacred service. Indeed the term *miles* was a common designation for the devout in Oriental paganism; and it is a familiar fact that from the time of Paul the service of Christ was described in military figures.

Not least significant was the influence of the Eastern religions in turning the gaze of their devotees from this world to the next. The common goal for them was future security and happiness, with which safety and joy on earth might or might not be united. Roman and Greco-Roman religion had been concerned with prosperity here and now, and had taken practically no account of the next world. Greek philosophy too had for

the most part concentrated men's attention on this world. The effect of the Oriental religions was directly the opposite of this. The whole life of the *sacrati* was conducted not with reference to the sensible realities of the present existence, but as a preparation for the realization of ideal hopes in the life beyond this. Now any religion which shifts the view of its followers to the next world is certain to have a profound effect on ethical ideals, and in general to make its devotees think less highly of the present life; wealth, comfort, and immediate success become matters of less moment than the permanent welfare of the soul. Such was the influence exerted by the Oriental gods. Their devotees were ready, for example, to give of their wealth, counting such loss as gain. Dedications to all gods involving money expenditure are common enough; but apparently few shrines of the Greco-Roman gods were so rich in expensive votive offerings made by private individuals as those of the Oriental gods; such as, for example, a shrine of Isis at Acci in Spain, or that of Isis and Bubastis near Nemi in the Alban Hills. Toward the close of the fourth century, when the State's support had been withdrawn from pagan shrines, a pious devotee rebuilt the shrine of Mithras which his grandfather had founded at Rome on the spot where San Silvestro now stands, and added at the end of the recording inscription these lines:

“Damna piis meliora lucro; quis ditior illo est,
qui cum caelicolis parcus bona dividit heres?”

“But loss for the pious is better than gain; who richer than he,
Who saves his ancestral wealth and divides his goods with the gods?”

Symbolical poverty at least was cultivated. According to the anonymous *Carmen contra Paganos*, the devotee of the Great Mother, when about to descend into the pit that he might receive the bloody bath of the taurobolium,

put on a dress of rags and humbled himself as a beggar. This and other evidences show that the Oriental religions actually aroused in their followers a disregard for the things of this world as of little value in comparison with those of the next.

Thus we find that there were many elements in these Eastern religions which in the last three centuries of paganism at least made for righteousness. The concept of divinity as a kindly providence which cares for the individual and exacts the same good qualities from man, the unremitting devotion demanded of the devotees, the sense of moral pollution and a longing for moral purification, the shifting of men's eyes from the material gains of this world to the ideal rewards of the next—all these and many other things gave to the Oriental cults distinct and positive ethical and spiritual values. Furthermore, the self-restraint, the gentle asceticism, the obligation to strive unceasingly on the side of righteousness against the evil powers, which these religions imposed, are not to be neglected. Within the religious bodies, whose members were brothers (*fratres, consecrati*) the individual learned submission to the head of the society (*pater*), gained self-control and courage for his struggle against the evils of life. No one can read the evidence we possess and not be impressed by the earnestness and devotion of the faithful. That the Oriental religions actually contributed to the higher moral and spiritual life of the Roman Empire during the second, third, and fourth centuries is beyond question. With all the attacks which the protagonists of Christianity made on its opponents, they do not charge the devotees of these Oriental cults with moral degradation. Their silence is significant. As a matter of fact, the Pagans and Christians in the fourth century certainly held to similar standards of morality, and a change from one belief to the other did not require any great read-

justment of ethical principles. It is very true that the pagan religions from the East had their charlatans and quacks in abundance, that their noblest elements were often entangled in a mesh of magic, superstitions, and false beliefs; but Christianity too suffered from the same evils. Christianity triumphed because of its own inherent superiority to the other religions, not because its rivals were wholly evil and degrading. To fail to recognize the real moral value of Oriental Paganism is to fail to understand the first centuries of our era, and so to remain blind to the true nature of the world in which Christianity established its superior worth.